

# ネイティブスピーカー再検討：日本における理想的な英語教師

## The Native Speaker Re-examined: The Ideal ELT in Japan

□メ□, ヤスミン ROMERO, Yasmine

● ボイシ州立大学  
Boise State University



**Keywords** 外国語としての英語, 英語教育, ネイティブ・スピーカー, 日本  
English as a Foreign Language, English language teaching, Native speaker, Japan

### ABSTRACT

多くの機関が海外から英語教師の採用を続けていることから、日本における理想的な英語教師（ELT）とは誰かということは重要な問題である。最も重要なのはネイティブ・スピーカーであることなのだろうか、それとも資格やある特性を備えていることなのだろうか。現役の英語教師と英語教師経験者58名に調査を行い、200の求人広告を調べた。本稿では、ネイティブ・スピーカーであることは日本のこの問題に依然として関係していること、外国人英語教師は基本的な日本語技能を備えるべきであること、理想的なELTは動機や熱意といった個人的要因が主要な要素であることを論じている。

As many institutions in Japan continue to hire English teachers from abroad, the question of who the ideal English language teacher (ELT) in Japan is becomes important. Is it being a native speaker or possessing qualifications and certain characteristics that matters the most? Surveying 58 current and past ELTs as well as 200 job advertisements, this paper argues that the native speaker is still a relevant issue in Japan, that non-Japanese foreign English teachers should have basic Japanese language skills, and that the ideal ELT is largely constructed of individual factors like motivation and enthusiasm.

## INTRODUCTION

Although Ferguson (1983: vii) suggests that the native speaker (NS) issue should be “quietly dropped,” who the NS is has remained highly debated. The debate has centered around the native/nonnative dichotomy. Many scholars (Kachru & Nelson, 1996; Phillipson, 1992; Prabhu, 1998; Singh, 1998) argue that the dichotomy is perpetuated by the term NS, while Medgyes (1996) argues for an embrace of the dichotomy. However, it is Davies’s (2003: 197) exploration of the NS as both ‘myth’ and ‘reality’. He states that the NS is a “fine myth [...] but it is useless as a measure”. According to Paikeday (1985), the NS is dead; like Davies (2003), Paikeday (1985: 87) asserts that “proficiency is key [,] but how do we identify the proficient speakers for linguistic purposes? Which is the chicken, and which is the egg—speakers or languages?” As Paikeday (1985) illustrates, the term NS is complicated and avoided not only by linguists (Ferguson, 1983), but also by codification agencies, such as dictionaries. Its definition in the Oxford Dictionary (2008) remains vague: “a person who has spoken a specified language since earliest childhood, as opposed to a person who has learnt it as a second or subsequent language in later life.” According to Paikeday (1985: 15), such definitions do not “do justice to the linguistic meaning.”

### Purpose of this study

This study looks at Japan’s English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context, investigating whether or not the NS remains an issue as many institutions (e.g. AEON, Gaba, JET, NOVA) continue to hire English language teachers (ELTs) from overseas. By quantifying and codifying 200 ELT job postings (JoPs) on Gaijinpot.com and JobsinJapan.com, as well as surveying current and past ELTs who have taught or are teaching in Japan, I attempt to answer

the following questions: What matters the most—being a native speaker or possessing qualifications and certain characteristics? Should non-Japanese foreign English teachers have basic Japanese language skills? Who would be the ideal English language teacher in Japan?

## METHODOLOGY

### Data collection and participants

Data were collected through 200 job advertisements (JoPs) and a survey of 58 current and past ELTs. The 200 JoPs were divided equally into four school types (primary, secondary, conversational, and other), and their language proficiency requirements were coded into five categories: none, basic, conversational, business, and native. Values were assigned to each category (e.g. native=5, none=1). As a result, the higher the mean, the higher the proficiency required. The ELT survey, on the other hand, investigated four main categories: *linguistic*, *sociolinguistic*, *educational*, and *individual* factors. While the *linguistic* category addressed language proficiency requirements, the *sociolinguistic* category examined the importance of culture in language teaching. Furthermore, it examined the native-nonnative dichotomy. In contrast, the *educational* category asked what is more important for an ELT to have: a university degree, professional training, or teaching experience? The *individual* category gauged what characteristics make up the ideal ELT in Japan.

The 58 past and current ELTs consisted of 41 females and 17 males, with an average age of 26. Most participants were American (n=34). The remaining participants came from Africa (n=1), Australia (n=1), Canada (n=2), Singapore (n=1), and the UK (n=5). The majority of participants had lived in Japan for four years or less, had some teaching experience before coming to Japan, and were English NS with 31 having Japanese language

skills to various degrees. 41 participants had at least a Bachelor's degree.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Is the native speaker still 'alive'?

In spite of the rejection of the term 'native speaker' by the scholars reviewed earlier, this label has not been avoided in ELT JoPs. Overall, 77% (n=154) of the 200 JoPs analyzed required native ELP. Furthermore, 52% (n=104) required that the applicant be a NS. If we assume that these JoPs define the NS as in the Oxford Dictionary (2008), then there are two main questions that must be answered: what minimum age qualifies as the "earliest childhood"? Where does this leave a Japanese teacher of English who is highly proficient in English but learned English as an adult? The first question remains unanswered in the JoPs; however, Participant 3 (P3) of the ELT survey claims that: "Just like with any language, the best teacher is one who was born with that language and grew up with that language. They know it much better than anyone else ever could." For P3, nativeness is determined by what language one is raised in. The second question is answered by only one JoP, which still specifies that the Japanese teacher's English must be "close to Native" (JoP 50). The remaining JoPs clearly state that applicants "MUST be a Native Speaker of English" (JoP 18).

Even in the ELT survey, there is considerable bias towards the NS. When participants were asked what they would prefer (Native English Speaking Teachers, NEST, or Non Native English Speaking Teachers, NNEST), 30 participants wanted a NEST, whereas one wanted a NNEST. 17 wanted the benefits of both, while 5 were happy with either. Only two participants wanted a balanced bilingual. From these results, NS favoritism suggests that the NS is not a 'quiet' issue, but a very salient one. Even though a few teachers (n=8) recognized the benefits

of a NNEST, there seemed to be a catch:

#### Excerpt 1 (P25)

I would prefer a native speaker honestly. [...] While a non-native speaker might be able to explain better than a native speaker at times, there will always be idioms, pronunciations [sic] and other small things that will be beyond their knowledge for the simple fact that they didn't grow up in the language.

Childhood acquisition is the sole determinant of NS membership that cannot be fulfilled by NNS according to Lee (2005). Davies (2003) agrees, but only concerning the NS features of accuracy and pronunciation, which are performance rather than competence issues. Surprisingly, the second reason (mentioned by 4 participants) to learn from a NNEST was the shared experience of learning another language, that encourages empathy with students; however, this is outweighed by the benefits of learning from a NEST.

#### Excerpt 2 (P18; emphasis mine)

While there is a lot to be said for being taught by [an NNS], **all [NNS] eventually make mistakes that a [NS] would not**. These are usually related to collocations or vocab. I work as both an ALT and *eikaiwa* teacher and the *eikaiwa* accepts all "native-like" English speakers. All the non-native speakers make mistakes that I can easily identify as errors.

Others like P18 claim that the NEST has "a more intimate knowledge [of the target language]" (P52) that justifies the common assumption that the NEST is more "authentic" (P8) than the NNEST. This tendency is revealed by 18 participants (out of 56) who preferred a NEST because of 'language inheritance,' or how speakers define themselves because they are born and raised in particular languages, based on Rampton's (1996) definition of 'language loyalty'. Further, the participants linked 'language inheritance' to linguistic accuracy. When asked if English is best taught by speakers

from the *Inner Circle* varieties of English, 46 out of 57 participants agreed. P6 asserts: “I would prefer a native speaker because [...] I would be more confident that the language I was learning was correct.” This issue of accuracy, according to Davies (2003), is one criterion most affected by the age at which a language learner begins the process of acquisition. But using this criterion to compare a NEST to a NNEST is inappropriate as Davies (2003: 96) states that it is “largely a philosophical issue.” Nonetheless, participants found linguistic competence to be very important, as P4 argues: “A [NNS], no matter how fluent, [takes on] an accent [...] usually from their mother tongue, and [will] not be able to answer the more obscure questions about language and culture.” This supports Prabhu’s (1998: 55) claim that the NNS is regarded as an “[instance] of failed replication” of the “the way [the language] is meant to be spoken” (P54). One participant discussed how he conformed to the standard in order to rid himself of his Spanish accent:

Excerpt 3 (P61)

[My Spanish accent] hurt me socially. I was not excepted [sic] as easily into groups as I am now that I speak as a native born American. But, deep inside I wish I still had the accent because it would defined more as a person. [...] There is something poetic about Indian English or Japanese English or any other variation. Sure, the speaker will set him or herself apart, but individuality is probably more important in the English speaking world than fluency.

Responses to the survey reflect this perspective. Most participants felt English is best taught by a NEST at the most education levels, especially primary school (mean=4.35) When asked to rank a NEST versus a NNEST of Japanese, with near native abilities in English and Japanese respectively, participants ranked the NEST higher than NNEST. The results suggest that the NEST is more highly regarded than the NNEST, regardless of the NNEST’s English

proficiency. The ‘native’ model is favored, but which ‘native’ model is the question at hand.

Utilizing Kachru & Neslon’s (1996) parameters of *Inner*, *Outer*, and *Expanding* circles, I examined attitudes towards standard and nonstandard varieties of English. I use ‘standard’ in the sense of Davies’ (2003: 65) claim that “the process of standardising is an operational definition of the [NS]”. Therefore, perceptions of those varieties of English (*Inner Circle*) that perpetuate standardization and codification agencies were compared to perceptions of those English varieties outside of the *Inner Circle*, e.g. Indian, Singaporean, and Japanese Englishes.

The general trend was to favor the ‘standard’ or *Inner Circle* (American and British English) varieties, followed by *Outer Circle* varieties (Singaporean and Indian English), and lastly *Expanding Circle* varieties (Japanese English). When asked how ‘pleasant’ participants found Japanese English (*Expanding Circle*) to be, most participants found it unpleasant to some extent (mean=2.12). *Outer Circle* varieties (Indian and Singaporean English) were more positively perceived with a mean of 3.77. Answers to whether it is important to teach “standard English” (a certain type of English spoken by educated native speakers, such as by BBC and ABC News anchors) reveal that *Inner Circle* varieties are still regarded as the most important, as the mean (4.05) indicates. Furthermore, most participants (n=19) chose Standard American English when asked to decide for the Japanese government what variety of English should be taught at the primary school level, and why? This is followed by British English (n=7) and Standard North American English (n=7). However, 11 participants did recognize that “[t]he problem with choosing only one form of English is that this limits the students understanding of the other varieties of English in the world” (P56). But most responses specified a mix of *Inner Circle* varieties (e.g. British and standard American English) “because they are

the standard for academic writing, and for most fiction as well” (P45). One participant said:

Excerpt 4 (P36)

Can’t choose one--sorry. The key to learning English is to learn enough strategies for communicating with any speaker of English, native or nonnative (and native or nonnative of any variety). At the primary school level, the differences among varieties of English are pretty negligible, unless you’re talking only about pronunciation.

Excerpt 4 returns us to the issue of pronunciation. Even though ‘language inheritance’ was the most salient reason for why participants chose a NEST, pronunciation came in second (n=16). Many participants claimed that they wanted to “imitate a native accent” (P38). This relates directly to why the Japanese variety is perceived as unpleasant by most participants (mean=2.12). But like Excerpt 3, some respondents felt that a non-standard variety is ‘poetic’ and reflects the ‘individual.’ However, these reasons were not among the four main reasons why participants chose a certain standard. Instead, globalization (n=23), linguistic reasons (n=7), culture (n=6), and ‘language inheritance’ (n=5) were the most popular. Participants chose globalization because the United States is “where most of the jobs and speakers live anyways” (P21) or “has the largest amount of global reach” (P24). However, Coughlan (2004) reports that “a third of the people on the planet will be learning English in the next decade [...] a billion English learners [...] will have doubled [ten years from the year 2000].” Therefore, the idea to choose a standard based on globalization is questionable. Linguistic reasons (n=7, 12.1%) included the following, such as “[e]asier to pronounce” (P23) or “because RP is generally non-rhotic, Japanese students don’t have to struggle to produce final r sounds” (P28). Culture was the third most significant feature (n=6, 10.3%), which most participants chose because of the American

entertainment industry: “Japanese are very heavily influenced by American movies, TV, and music” (P24). The final reason, ‘language inheritance,’ came from respondents who stated that they are biased towards a certain standard because of their upbringing and personal experience.

Paikeday’s (1985) claim that the NS is dead is wishful thinking, as the JoPs and participants in this study demonstrate that the label NS is not dead. Most job advertisements (154 out of 158, 97%) in Japan ask for a NEST, and the majority of ELTs (n=30) favor NESTs over NNESTs; furthermore, a bias towards the *Inner Circle* varieties of English (mean=4.05) suggests, like Ikome (1998: 63), that the NS is a “political predicate [seemingly] couched in a traditional ‘given.’”

## Implications of language proficiency requirements

One of my main inquiries was why teaching jobs in Japan do not require Japanese. I addressed this question by looking at Japanese Language Proficiency (JLP) requirements for job postings and four questions on the ELT survey. As a result, three major camps surfaced: pro-JLP, anti-JLP, and moderate.

*Pro-JLP.* The pro-JLP camp argues that having some Japanese language ability is just “common sense [...] if I was hiring an ELT I would want them to have a solid understanding [sic] of basic sentence structure and a vocabulary of daily-life terms **so that they wouldn’t be completely dependent upon the company and locked into the small English-speaking community.**” (P23; emphasis mine). This respondent’s attitude supports the majority of participants (n=27) who agreed that Japanese should be required. However, the appropriate level varied from survival to intermediate. The survey of JoPs does not support this attitude, as 68 JoPs did not require JLP. 58 required basic JLP, and even fewer

(n=33) required conversational JLP; however, it should be noted that conversational and primary schools tended to require no JLP, while other school types varied from none to native.

*Anti-JLP.* The anti-JLP camp argues that: “it should not be a requirement as the teacher is here to teach English, not Japanese” (P20). The anti-JLP camp was the minority (n=11). Their main reason is that JLP is not necessary (n=3). These results are similar to what was found in the JoPs, where the majority did not require any JLP (n=68). However, it should be noted that basic JLP was required by 58 schools, suggesting that basic Japanese language skills could improve the likelihood of getting a job in Japan. Furthermore, 39 participants agreed that non-Japanese English teachers in Japan should have survival Japanese language skills. Nonetheless, anti-JLP supporters argue that:

Excerpt 5 (P3)

Technically, English teachers should not need to know Japanese to teach English. If one wants to learn a foreign language effectively, they need to be placed in an environment where only that foreign language is spoken. Otherwise, they will get lazy and not pick up anything. By forcing them to pick up stuff and learn, then perhaps they can remember something.

Addressing P3’s argument, participants were asked to evaluate: ‘Speaking Japanese in class encourages students to wait for translations’. Like P3, the majority of participants agreed, with a mean of 4.21. These results support the anti-JLP camp, which in turn supports the English-only movement.

However, it could be argued that the classroom is the only exposure to English that Japanese students will receive; therefore, an English-only environment should be provided in the English class. Most participants moderately agreed with this statement, with a mean of 4.07, which suggests that according to most participants, an English-only approach is ‘necessary’ in the EFL context. Whether this should

be implemented through team teaching in the classroom is another matter entirely. P3 voices the frustration many ALTs claim to feel in the English language classroom: “I’d want that English teacher to have control over what is taught and is not just a parrot who sits in the corner and just [listens] and repeat[s].” Unlike P3, P5 states that the “Japanese teacher provides explanations,” because the English teacher cannot.

*The Moderates.* Looking at each camp’s reasoning, it can be assumed that both agree Japanese has a place outside the classroom, but not necessarily inside the classroom. The moderates, those who do not fit in either camp, further illustrate this perspective.

Excerpt 6 (P17)

Requiring English teachers to know Japanese before hiring could cause a drastic problem in finding enough teachers to fill the requirement of native English speakers currently in Japan. [...] I do think teachers and people living in Japan should make some effort to learn the local language and understand local culture. However, requiring these things [...] is a complex problem and no one factor will solve it.

As P17 argues, it is not the learning of Japanese that is problematic, but making it a requirement. P52 agrees that foreign teachers should learn some Japanese, but “thinks that” As soon as Japanese becomes ‘required,’ even if it’s only survival language or your “please” and “thank you,” people are going to balk at coming to Japan [...] and requiring incoming teachers to speak some [Japanese] is doubtless going to make a few otherwise valuable teachers give Japan a second thought.” Being an ex-Nova teacher herself, P48 supports this view but emphasizes the importance of the institution’s role in providing Japanese language learning opportunities for ELTs. P48’s suggestion questions why companies are not providing Japanese language assistance. There are two tentative answers: NS teachers are



seen as a ‘cultural import’ and *nihonjinron* (or the idea that Japanese language and culture is unique). In MEXT’s “strategic plan to cultivate ‘Japanese With English Abilities,’” the above answers are reexamined. MEXT (2003) wants to “promote” hiring NS teachers, as well as the “placement of ALTs” in order to “[utilize] human resources with fluent English-language abilities”. Furthermore, MEXT ensures that Japanese language abilities will be “improved” with the implementation of reading activities, availability of individual guidance, a new Course of Study, and teacher training. This demonstrates Morrow’s (2004) claim that English “threaten[s] Japan’s distinctive culture,” therefore giving reason and rise to the role of the national language. However, P38 says Japanese is not the issue, it is the teacher’s “experience learning ANY foreign language.” He feels that this experience is important as it “improves a teacher’s ability to empathize with his/her students”:

Excerpt 8 (P38)

If a teacher plans to stay in Japan for [...] more than a year or two, they should make SOME efforts to learn spoken Japanese. I was appalled to meet white folks in Tokyo who had lived there for decades and still could hardly order in a restaurant. Seems like cultural imperialism to me (and yes, I’m white too).

P38 agrees with Phillipson (1996) that linguistic imperialism is pervasive and the medium used, English, can be wielded by those in power. But do NESTs hold this ‘power’? That question remains unanswered.

## The ideal English language teacher in Japan

What, exactly, makes the ideal ELT in Japan? P28 stated that “[it’s] not nativity, but good teaching skills based on sound ELT method”. According to the JoPs, an ideal ELT possesses a university degree, has an enthusiastic and energetic attitude, has motivation

and interpersonal skills, loves pupils, and behaves professionally. The issue of nativeness is also salient. According to survey responses, out of the four categories (linguistic, sociolinguistic, educational, and individual), eight factors stand out: creativity (n=17), an enthusiastic and energetic attitude (n=15), motivation (n=15), conversational level or higher JLP (n=13), knowledge/interest in Japanese culture (n=13), personable (n=12), possessing a university degree (n=11), and a personality that encourages students (n=11). Only five participants addressed the ‘nativeness’ issue. However, this could be due to the survey’s set up; many of the participants already voiced their preferences and may have been influenced by the possible individual factors listed on the survey. Nonetheless, the survey of JoPs and ELTs show that both the employer and employees have different expectations of who the ideal ELT is. P25 responds that the ideal NEST would be knowledgeable in the Japanese culture and language, motivated, personable, creative and have a thick skin:

Excerpt 9 (P25)

You’re going to be offended, either by gross ignorance, rampant xenophobia or plain old prejudice. [. . .] The teaching isn’t the hardest part. It’s everything that takes place outside of the classroom that’s hard to deal with. Teaching is easy. Surviving? Not so much.

Excerpt 9 illustrates the issue of social acceptance into Japanese society, where both Japanese and other speakers alike “who venture outside [...] invite suspicions” (Morrow, 2004: 94). Further, it calls into question NEST biases in an EFL context. As Morrow (2004) posits, “[the] fear that the spread and use of a foreign language (in this case, English) could diminish the role of the national language” is evident, not only limiting non-Japanese NEST from learning Japanese, but also preventing Japan from realizing the potential of second language skills (other than Japanese) in light of globalization. Even

though MEXT has attempted this, there has been much resistance to fully integrating English at the primary level, whereas other countries belonging to the *Expanding Circle* (e.g. Korea) have already taken the necessary steps.

## CONCLUSION

The responses to the ELT survey and the results of the job postings give tentative answers to my research questions. While some scholars (Ferguson, 1983; Paikeday, 1985) say that the term ‘native speaker’ is no longer relevant, others condemn it for its “exclusive” use (Kachru & Nelson, 1996; Phillipson, 1992; Widdowson, 1994). My results support that nativeness is a prevalent factor; the ‘native speaker’ is not dead, but still ‘alive’ and dominates the JoPs examined and most survey responses. However, when judged against individual factors (e.g. enthusiastic and energetic attitude), respondents find individual factors more important than nativeness. Furthermore, Japanese language ability as a requirement seems to vary across school types.

Past and current ELT views of requiring Japanese varied as well, some wanted Japanese required, while others did not deem it necessary. In addition, many participants felt it should be encouraged, rather than required. However, participants agreed that having Japanese language skills, an enthusiastic and energetic attitude, and motivated to teach are assets for any non-Japanese ELT in Japan. As a result, I feel that the ‘native speaker’ should not be ‘quietly’ dropped. It should continue to be questioned in tandem with individual factors, qualifications, and shifting perspectives.

## References

- Coughlan, S. (2004, December 9). English ‘world language’ forecast. *BBC News*. Retrieved February 14, 2007, from <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/4080401.stm>
- Davies, A. (2003). *The native speaker: Myth and reality*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Ferguson, C. (1983). Language planning and language change. In J. Cobarrubias and J. Fishman (Eds.), *Progress in Language Planning* (pp.29-40). Berlin: Mouton.
- Ikome, O.M. (1998). Language ‘Nativization’ in West Africa: Acculturation and Acquisition of ‘Native’ Speakers in Cameroon. In Singh, R. (Eds.), *The Native Speaker: Multilingual Perspectives* (pp.62-69). New Delhi: Sage Publications.
- Kachru, B. B. & Nelson C. L. (1996). World Englishes. In McKay, S.L. and Hornberger, N.H. (Eds.), *Sociolinguistics and Language Teaching* (71-102). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Medgyes, P. (1996). Native or nonnative: Who’s worth more? In T. Hedge & N. Whitney (Eds.), *Power, pedagogy, and practice* (pp.31-42). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology. (2003). *Regarding the Establishment of an Action Plan to Cultivate “Japanese with English Abilities.”* Retrieved February 10, 2007 from <http://www.mext.go.jp/english/topics/03072801.htm>
- Morrow, P. R. (2004). English in Japan: The World Englishes Perspective. *JALT Journal*, 26 (1): 79-101.
- Oxford English Dictionary (2008). Retrieved March 1, 2008, from <http://www.oed.com/>
- Paikeday, T.M. (1985). *The Native Speaker is Dead!* Toronto: Paikeday Publishing Inc.
- Phillipson, R. (1992). *Linguistic Imperialism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Prabhu, N.S. (1998). On ‘New/Non-Native’ Englishes: A Quartet. In Singh, R. (Eds.), *The Native Speaker: Multilingual Perspectives* (pp. 53-57). New Delhi: Sage Publications.
- Rampton, M.B.H. (1996). Displacing the “native speaker” : Expertise, affiliation, and inheritance. In T. Hedge & N. Whitney (Eds.), *Power, pedagogy, and practice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Singh, R. (1998). On ‘New/Non-Native’ Englishes: A Quartet. In Singh, R. (Eds.), *The Native Speaker: Multilingual Perspectives* (pp.45-50). New Delhi: Sage Publications.
- Widdowson, H.G. (1994). The ownership of English. *TESOL Quarterly*, 28, 377-389.



## Acknowledgments

I would like to thank all of the teachers who participated in my survey for sharing and discussing their ideas.